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ABSTRACT

A study explored how children make decisions to use radio. Thirty 8-9 year olds were interviewed in depth and 71 9-12 year olds filled out a questionnaire. Results indicated that children were capable of describing their radio listening behavior on a day-to-day basis, and that listening processes appeared to be similar to that reported in studies of adult listening behavior. Findings provide support for the notion that children are capable of making their own decisions concerning media and are being allowed by parents to practice this autonomy. The listening process of children also appears to support social learning theory, which suggests that children use radio for social purposes and are dependent on radio to enable them to "fit in" with their elementary school friends. More research concerning children and their media activities is essential if educators are to deal with children and media consumption and learning in a knowledgeable manner. (Contains 52 references and a table of data. The questionnaire is attached.) (RS)

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Children's Use of Radio: A Pilot Study

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Since the inception of radio, broadcasters, performers, and advertisers have asked who is listening, how the audience can best be served, and what the best way is for advertisers and broadcasters to profit. Many different methods have been used over the last 70 years to try and determine who listens to radio (Beville, 1988; Campbell, 1976; Seldes, 1950). Currently, radio rating services consistently omit one segment of the audience, anyone under the age of 12, in their attempts to define the audience. (Arbitron, the major radio rating service, will include this age group on request.) Many groups and individuals believe it is time for the radio industry to stop ignoring this audience and place the same amount of importance on radio programming for children as television does (Bunchez, 1978; Zahn, 1990; Winn, 1977). Little research has been done concerning how children use radio to help them learn. This pilot study begins to address children's radio listening habits as they relate to information processing and social learning.

Children's radio evolved during the last 70 years from being an integral part of everyday life to being almost non-existent, as evidenced by sporadic efforts at programming. It seems to be experiencing a slight resurgence and is probably more accessible now than at any time since the 1950s. Some radio operators recognize the commercial possibilities, others the educational value, and still others, the opportunity to give children their own identity away from commercial pop music and commercial television. Our goal is not only to document that children have listened to radio historically and continue to do so, but to offer some insight about how they use radio to learn. By comparing children's radio use to adults', we may glean clues concerning how children learn to socialize with their peers.

An Historical Setting

Historically, radio played an integral role in the lives of children in early radio audiences. In the 1930s and 1940s radio flourished, and entire families could be found sitting by their radios, enjoying their favorite shows (Hilliard, 1985). Radio programmers recognized the popularity of children's programs by designating a specific time, usually 5 to 6 p.m., for the "children's hour" (Boemer, 1989). The popularity of radio continued into the early 1950s when television began to erode the audience base. Radio, while seemingly still enjoying the listenership of young children, stopped programming to them (Cliff, III, 1978; Keith, 1987). In the late 1970s and early 1980s some people attempted once more to reach the younger listener with programs targeted toward children. In an effort to create a broader appeal for children's radio programs, several organizations are in the process of establishing commercial satellite networks directed to the young audience and one such network is operational (Brunelli, 1993, Jan. 11; Fuerst, 1990; Moon, 1989; O'Connell, 1990; Osewalt, 1990).

Some independently produced programs, such as "We Like Kids," created by KTOO in Juneau, Alaska (Hall, 1989), "Pickleberry Pie," produced in Santa Cruz, California by P.J. Swift, and "Kid's Corner" from WXPN-FM in Philadelphia (Giovannoni, 1992, Sept. 21) have been successful and are aired on stations around the country (Price, 1989). Others include "Halfway Down the Stairs" from KPFK, Los Angeles; "Rainbow Tales" on WMBR-FM in Cambridge, MA; and "Imagination Parade" on WFDU-FM in Teaneck, NJ (Deming, 1990, Feb.).

Children as Consumers

The renewed interest in targeting children may be explained in part by the size of the audience and by the recognition the role of children as consumers. Fifteen percent

of the population are children ages 2 to 11 (Battaglia, 1992). Observers have noted today's children have a considerable and growing influence in making family purchases. Williams (1990) proposes that children influence family purchasing decisions, large and small, because they have become more independent in today's society with both parents employed. He suggests that in both single- and two-parent families, children learn to play off parents' guilt to satisfy their demands. Whatever the motivation, the magnitude of their influence is astounding; Williams quotes James McNeal, professor of marketing at Texas A & M University, who estimates "that youngsters under 12 spend $50 billion a year" (p. 26). Children represent an important segment of the marketplace and seem to exert an increasing amount of influence in the family decision-making process.

This seems to contrast with a point of view expressed by Arbitron radio consultant Gienelle Williams, who says Arbitron is willing to determine if a younger audience is listening to the radio if the station will pay for the extra charge (Williams, 1989). However, Williams says the problem is money. Children don't attract advertisers, and the direct money for children's products does not come from children but from parents. This has not been the case for children's television, and more research needs to be done to determine if radio could be just as effective.

Characteristics of Adults' Radio Use

That all advertisers do not recognize children as a major economic force explains only part of the lack of attention given to them as an audience. Much of the research conducted concerning children's media use has focused on the effects of media on children and considered them as a special audience, incapable of responding to the media like adults (Tuchscherer, 1988; Wartella, 1979; Liebert, Sprafkin & Davidson,

1982; Potter, 1992). Before we can question the validity of this assumption, it is essential to examine what is known about adults' radio habits.

Adults listen to radio primarily during drive times, usually associated with residents of large metropolitan areas who tune in to their car radios between 6:30 and 9 a.m. and 3:30 and 6:30 p.m. on their way to and from work. An examination of daily audience patterns of those 12 and older reveals that listening to radio and watching television are a complementary rather than competitive relationship, according to Ziegler and Howard (1991). Radio attracts its largest audiences during morning drive time and somewhat smaller audiences during midday and evening drive times. Television's audiences meet and surpass radio's in the late afternoon and grow during the evenings. This is a particularly important observation, since the lack of radio programming for children is attributed to the youngsters' desertion of the medium. Prior to this study, the lack of research makes it difficult to tell whether children are similar to adults in their listening habits.

Zeigler and Howard (1991) make a number of other observations about radio audience composition. It includes a wide variety of people, since it is estimated that at least 557,800,000 radios of 5.6 radio sets per household were in use in 1990 (National Association of Broadcasters, 1992). Generally, listening patterns do not differ greatly among men and women, although this may vary from station to station. Often people do other things while the radio plays. Radio is used extensively by teenagers, who listen mostly after school and on weekends (Giovannoni, 1992, Aug. 24, p. 17) In most markets, radio is highly fragmented, resulting in segmented programming that enables advertisers to reach specific target audiences. Radio advertisers seem to have an opportunity to reach the kids' market through segmented programming.

Programming radio stations for adults includes three key areas: music, information, and personalities (Fletcher, 1987). Music is the most important ingredient in selecting radio stations. Second in importance is information, including news, weather, time, traffic, and public events. The third area is personality, defined as a name associated with the station. At many stations the early morning announcer is the most identified personality, since this is the time when stations usually attract the most listeners. One of our objectives in this study is to determine if children are part of the radio audience, and if they are, whether they use the same criteria as adults in selecting stations.

A Theoretical Framework

Tichenor and McLeod (1989) observe that "by and large, the literature on impact of mass media on social systems is functionalist" p. 21). We believe it is important to expand the uses and gratifications model (McQuail, 1991) to encompass how children use the media to help them interact socially. This study builds on the uses and dependency model proposed by Rubin and Windahl (1986). This model links an individual's use of media with larger societal structures, synthesizing a uses and gratifications perspective with a societal-based framework. They argue, among other things, that media use results from a combination of external (social) elements and internal (social and psychological) characteristics of individuals. From this theory, we surmise that a need to learn how to socialize makes children dependent on radio use; children use radio to teach them how to make the transition to adolescence and then adulthood.

Before examining how children use the radio, it is beneficial to review how radio programmers have viewed children as an audience. As television made inroads in

programming previously dominated by radio, new radio formats emerged that did not serve children (Christenson & DeBenedittis, 1986; Hilliard, 1985). Radio moved from block programming of comedy, drama and variety programs to more information and popular music formats. Radio programmers appeared to believe television was usurping the need to provide programs for children. Since no programming was specifically designed for this young audience, researchers tended to ignore them. Even a review of research on children in media (Greenberg, 1988) reveals very few studies that focus exclusively on radio use among children, although estimates of radio use by them are found sporadically. Research that was done indicates a concern that media affected children differently than adults. This research suggested the young mind might be potentially more susceptible to commercial messages, violent program content, and song lyrics (U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 1985). Even though research indicated repeatedly adults could not be directly affected by the mass media, the children in the audience were considered passive exceptions, and it followed that some groups and individuals suggested some sort of controls needed to be in place to protect children from the so-called harmful effects of the media (Cates & Strickland, 1975; Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 1985; Winn, 1977; Wertham, 1953). This notion continues today, with parental groups and legislators pushing for regulations to protect young, impressionable minds.

We question whether children are affected differently than adults when they listen to the radio. Do they begin at an early age to use radio for entertainment and enlightenment, as adults do? Are they capable of discriminating fantasy from reality? Explanations for children's radio use are grounded in theories that attempt to explain how children process information and learn to socialize. Children use what they hear

on the radio to help them relate in a meaningful way to their peers. They use this information in the construction of their social existence (Christenson and DeBenedittis, 1986).

Social learning theory suggests that radio may be "teaching" listeners what to expect from real life. Social learning theorists hold that perceivers use both external reinforcements and internal cognition to explain how humans learn from stimuli (Bandura, 1977). They emphasize that the environment from which one learns usually is not random; rather, it is selected. Media research suggests that learning from television is linked to social learning (Dorr, Kavaric, & Doubleday, 1990; Perse, Pavitt, & Burggraf, 1990; Skill & Wallace, 1990). We believe that such is the case also for radio, and we think this study will support Dominick's notion that radio is a portable friend (1974). Radio is important to youngsters because it helps them become members of a peer group as well as fulfilling entertainment and informational functions. We expect that children will indicate they do use radio, in part, to help them relate socially to their peers.

We speculate that children, like adults, learn a variety of things from the radio. As children anticipate their adolescence, they listen to radio in part because that is what older children do. As they do this, they select program content that is not random but reinforces social learning. Furthermore, we believe they will be capable of articulating that they use radio in a sophisticated manner, for purposes similar to adults. This study does not attempt to offer findings on a large scale, but to explore how children make decisions to use radio.

Methodology

Subjects

Data for this exploratory study were gathered in the spring and summer of 1990 and the spring of 1993. Thirty 8-9 year olds were interviewed in depth and 71 9-12 year olds filled out a questionnaire. The subjects were from rural and urban areas and represented a variety of economic backgrounds. All lived within forty miles of a major Midwestern city. The 8-12 age group was selected for several reasons. To date, no one has selected group of children in a specific age group. In addition, it apears some important changes are being made by children at these ages. The U.S. Senate Sub-Committee on Children, Family, Drugs, and Alcoholism concluded that children have made the determination by the fourth grade whether or not to use drugs (U.S. Congress, Senate, 1985). A study of music listening preferences of elementary students shows the transition from third to fourth grade pivotal in musical choices (Greer, Dorrow, & Randall, 1974). Child development researchers Branthwaite and Rogers (1985) claim: "The most dramatic and far-reaching changes in the child occur during the pre-school and early school years" (p.1). It appears that 8-12 year olds have developed their values and beliefs and begin to make some important changes.

Procedures

For the initial part of the study, each of the 30 children was interviewed in his or her home with at least one parent present, although the parent was asked not to participate unless specifically asked a question by the child. The parent was asked to be present so the subject might feel more comfortable than being with a total stranger. The parents cooperated and stayed out of the conversation, even though many times they seemed surprised by the answers given by the subject. Then each child was asked

to draw a floor plan of his or her house on a sheet of paper provided by the interviewer to get the subject to think about media and media use and to feel comfortable with the interview. The children used colored markers to indicate where different kinds of media were found in the house. They were asked to locate radios, televisions, stereos, cassette tape players, computers, video games, magazines and newspapers. This set the stage for the structured questions and allowed the children to become active participants in the interview. When the floor plan was complete, each child was asked to describe a typical day from the time he or she awakened until going to bed at night. The same question was asked about a weekend day. When questioning subjects in the summer, the interviewer asked about the differences when school is in session, and when questioning subjects in the spring, the interviewer asked about differences in the summer. Probing questions were used by the researcher to elicit specific statements about radio when radio was mentioned by the subject. Finally, if the child were a radio user, he or she was asked to program a radio station; that is, each child was asked to describe exactly what he or she wanted to hear on the station throughout the day. Contact with radio programs designed for children in this market is limited and probably did not affect children's responses; only one half hour of programming by the community radio stations is aimed at children, and most of the music played on the program is intended for a younger audience.

All interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed. All comments pertaining to radio were analyzed and a 12-question survey was developed (see Appendix). A local grade school in the area was contacted and three teachers volunteered to let their students participate in the survey. The response frequency was analyzed.

Findings

The findings offer strong evidence that children use radio on a regular basis. More importantly, we discovered that children are capable of articulating their use of radio, and they are surprisingly similar to adults in their variety of listening habits. We learned that children are able to distinguish different forms of media, and, more importantly, seem to be aware of their own radio habits.

Radio Usage

Responses revealed that children use radio in many ways, and listen at many different times of the day. Almost three-fourths of the children said they used the radio every week on a regular basis, and two-thirds of them used radio the same way every day. Girls and boys both reported being regular listeners (boys 60 percent, girls 63 percent).

The time of year was also important for listening behaviors. About half of the children reported using radio more in the summer than during the school year. About 45 percent listened equally in the summer and during the school year, while 10 percent reported listening more during the school year than in the summer.

Insert Table 1 about here

Children as an Active Audience

Like adults this radio audience of 8-12-year-olds appeared to be very active in their selection of radio. All the children reported making independent decisions about when and how to listen to the radio. As social learning theory indicates, the children

select from their environment what media and programs they want. The children didn't report making comparisons with others about when to listen. Even though the children reported listening independently as individuals, some similar listening patterns and characteristics emerged.

Listening Patterns

The morning appeared to be one of those times when children listened to the radio or at least used radio. Girls reported listening more in the morning than boys. Thirty-four percent of the girls reported listening to the radio in the morning, while only 17 percent of the boys reported listening in the morning. After school and during the evening, boys said they listened more than girls, even though the number of girls listening remained relatively constant. (Afternoon: boys, 57 percent; girls 34 percent. Evening: boys 53 percent; girls 37 percent).

One boy reported listening to the radio was an incentive to stay up a bit longer. He said, "If I want to stay up a half hour longer, I get to lay in my bed and listen to the radio."

The children also reported using radio in a specific place, like a ritual performed almost every day in a favorite location. For some this special place was their own room.

"I love to listen in my own room; that's where I listen to it the most." Another boy said, "In the evenings usually I go to my room and listen to the radio and tapes and stuff like that." However, not all the children reported their own room as a favorite listening place. A 9-year-old girl said, "I like to go to the basement; that's my favorite spot." An 8-year-old girl said her favorite place was the car: "I would have to say the

car is the place I enjoy listening the most." Still others associated a favorite activity with the radio.

Like adults, children listen to the radio while engaging in other activities. "I like to listen to the radio while I'm doing my hair in the morning." An 8-year-old boy listened while exercising. He said, "I almost always turn on the radio when I lift weights."

Nearly three quarters of the group of children reported having at least some influence on what radio station was listened to in the car. Usually the children said the parents were the ones who controlled the car radio, but this did not preclude some influence by children in station selection. "My mom lets me choose the station most of the time." "Usually he'll switch the channel just about every time I ask."

Type of Music

Most of those surveyed indicated the type of music played by radio stations was the key criterion for choosing a favorite station. This also is characteristic of adults' selection process in choosing a favorite station. Almost all of the children interviewed in the initial group reported being familiar with most of the well-known pop groups and many of the top 40 songs (songs listed among the major reporting music journals under the heading of pop music). Some of these children had even developed some correspondence with the singing stars, and one had formed a fan club in her neighborhood. However, two years following the initial in-depth interviews, children indicated their tastes had changed when they responded to the questionnaire. Nearly 50 percent of the children reported a preference of country music, while those listening to rock was about 30 percent. Those listening to top 40 was about 20 percent. The children

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seemed to mirror mainstream adult listening behavior, since country music is now the most popular format.

Other Listening Criteria Important in Programming

Many of the children indicated that, while music was the major factor in selecting a station, there were other criteria. The most important of these were weather. Almost 90 percent of both boys and girls listened to the radio for weather information. The numbers were also surprisingly high for children listening to the news. Seventy-seven percent of boys and 73 percent of girls said they listened to the news. The numbers were high for sports, but this finding might be attributed to the impact of the local college football team. More than half of those surveyed also said they listened to and participated in contests.

Even though it did not appear to be the major item of concern for the children, the children reported that radio should be more than just music.

Radio as a Socializing Agent

Many of the children (four-fifths) reported using radio while engaged in other activities. Some of those included playing with friends and using radio with other media. Listening to the radio with friends was a very enjoyable and pleasurable experience. Children used radio in conjunction with performing many different activities, in a manner similar to adults. Sometime it was with other media, sometimes just as background. The radio was used while children played video games, watched television, read books and magazines, swam, and played basketball. The children reported that radio was very much a social activity and was used many times with play.

Peer Pressure

Almost half of the children reported radio listening was important for relating to their peers, supporting findings by Christenson and DeBenedittis. The radio was important not only for enjoyment but in a social context as well. Many times it was socially important to listen to the radio. The songs and groups were talked about at school, and some students observed that if you did not respond correctly when asked, it could lower your social standing. Some of the children said they "lied" to their friends about what they listened to or heard, just so their friends wouldn't think they weren't part of the in crowd. One 9-year old girl said: "Well, they said it's just great. You gotta understand. Well, you're not cool if you don't think it's great." "Yeah, sometimes I feel like people don't like what other people like but say they like it anyway." More girls than boys reported talking with friends about the radio. Ninety-three percent of girls, compared to 70 percent of boys reported talking with friends about the radio.

Discussion

This exploratory study demonstrates that children are capable of describing their radio behavior on a day-to-day basis. Children are participants in radio, and actively and independently report making their own decisions about how they use the radio. The listening process reported by the children also appears similar to that reported in studies of adult listening behavior. The finding that 8-12 year olds can describe what they consider unique patterns of radio use provides support for the notion that children are capable of making their own decisions concerning media and are being allowed by parents to practice this autonomy. The study also suggests that children listen to radio in much the same way as adults. Children seem to use radio in similar

patterns as adults do and base their listening preferences on the same criteria as adults. This study shows that children follow the same listening criteria as Fletcher (1987) describes when programming for adults. Listening is almost automatic; clock radios turn on the music in the morning and, with slumber controls, turn it off at night. People listen to music at all times and in virtually all places. This sounds very much like the descriptions given by the children in the study. According to Fletcher, information was an important element for programming to adults, and this study indicates children consider it important also.

Rubin and Windahl's Uses and Dependency Model can be applied to the study of children and their radio listening habits. The 8- 12 year olds who were interviewed appear to make conscious decisions to tune in to particular programs they consider important. They use the information and music they hear on the radio to help them grow from childhood to adolescence; it gives them something to talk about with their peers, and it helps soothe or excite them.

The listening process of children also appears to support social learning theory, which suggests that children use radio for social purposes and are dependent on radio to enable them to "fit in" with their elementary school friends. Listening to the radio allows students to eavesdrop on the adult world, which was observed also by other researchers (Giovannoni, 1992, Sept. 7). It may be that the recognition of children's listening habits has the potential of making a significant impact on media, and more attention should be focused on this group, not only by researchers, but also by radio programmers, educators, and advertisers.

More research concerning children and their media activities is essential if we are to deal with children and media consumption and learning in a knowledgeable

manner. The notion that children somehow be counted as media audience seems commercially defensible. Children under the age of 12 are listening to the radio, yet major advertising buys for this medium do not include this group. Children do have buying power not only for themselves but as part of the family.

The findings of this study indicate more research is needed concerning children and media. More research is needed in other geographic areas, involving children of different ages. This will give a better indication of how children are using media to learn, give more information about this audience, and give the media a better understanding of this important audience segment.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for Children

1. What is your favorite radio station?
2. When is your favorite time to listen to the radio?
3. On the average, how many days a week do you listen to the radio?
4. What kinds of things are you doing when you listen to the radio?
5. Is there ever a time when you get to select the radio station when you are in the car?
6. Do you listen to the radio more in the summer, school year, or about the same?
7. Do you ever talk about things you hear on the radio with friends?
8. Do you ever listen to the news on the radio?
9. Do you ever listen to sports on the radio?
10. Do you ever listen to the weather on the radio?
11. Do you ever listen to contests on the radio?
12. What is your age?

Table

Summary of the Percentages of Children's Responses to the Questionnaire

Subjects (total)	101
Males	44
Females	57

Age and gender distribution
8 year olds: 7 males, 8 females
9 year olds: 8 male, 13 females
10 year olds: 19 males, 25 females
11 year olds: 7 males, 10 females
12 year olds: 3 males, 1 female

Music selection
Country: males (47%), females (51%)
Rock: males (37%), females (20%)
Top 40: males (13%), females (24%)

Listening times

Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Males (17%)	males (57%)	males (53%)
Females (34%)	females (34%)	females (37%)

Children listening every day
Males (60%)
Females (63%)

Control radio in car
Males (77%)
Females (71%)

Times children listen most

Summer	After school	Same
Males (53%)	Males (6%)	Males (40%)
Females (49%)	Females (17%)	Females (37%)

Talk radio with friends
Males (70%)
Females (93%)

What they listen to

News	Sports	Weather	Contests
Males (77%)	Males (83%)	Males (87%)	Males (50%)
Females (73%)	Females (66%)	Females (88%)	Females (63%)